

30 March 1986

PAGE A20

Prosecution Case Flawed in Rome Trial

Agca's Antics Gave Proceedings Air of Farce

By Michael Dobbs
Washington Post Foreign Service

ROME, March 29—It was described as "the trial of the century," Exhibit A in the case against the Kremlin for state-sponsored terrorism. If it could be shown that the Soviet Bloc was involved in the attempted assassination of a pope, the future of East-West relations could be in jeopardy.

In fact, the 10-month trial of three Bulgarians and five Turks on charges of plotting to murder Pope John Paul II failed spectacularly to live up to its advance billing. Attempts to prove a "Bulgarian connection" to the papal plot fell apart because of lack of evidence, a poorly argued prosecution case and the bizarre behavior of the state's star witness, Mehmet Ali Agca.

Agca, a Turkish gunman who shot and seriously wounded the Polish-born pontiff in St. Peter's Square on May 13, 1981, provided the bulk of the testimony against the Bulgarian defendants whom he depicted as his direct accomplices in the assassination attempt. In pretrial hearings, he described a series of meetings with the Bulgarians in Rome and alleged that he had received the equivalent of \$1.2 million to assassinate the pope.

Despite hearings in half a dozen countries and the calling of more than 50 witnesses, the court was unable to trace any of the money allegedly paid to Agca by the Bulgarian secret services. It was unable to shake the blanket denials of the Bulgarian defendants that they had ever known Agca. Indeed, it failed to produce independent confirmation for any direct Soviet Bloc role in the assassination attempt.

NEWS ANALYSIS

At times, the proceedings degenerated into farce as Agca, 28, sought to drag everybody into the plot, from the KGB to the CIA to the Italian secret services. Predict-

ing the end of the world, Agca presented himself to the court at various times as the reincarnation of Christ, an international terrorist to compare with "Carlos" and an expert in human behavior "greater than Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud put together."

By the end of the trial, presiding Judge Severino Santiapichi admitted to reporters that he was physically and mentally exhausted, having failed to get anywhere near the truth. The only clear victor from the proceedings seemed to be the pope's would-be assassin. Agca was able to satisfy his obvious craving for publicity in addition to keeping the real reasons for the assassination attempt shrouded in mystery.

The trial is over, but a number of questions remain about a case that was seized upon by conservatives in the United States as evidence of Soviet involvement in international terrorism and of western complicity in "covering up" the crime. Among the most important: the relationship between Bulgaria and a Turkish smuggling ring and flaws in the Italian judicial investigation into the papal plot.

■ Bulgaria and the "Turkish mafia." The trial failed to resolve the mystery surrounding Agca's stay in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia, in July and August 1980, at a time when he was wanted in neighboring Turkey for a sensational political murder.

Evidence produced at the trial showed that Agca traveled to Bulgaria on a false Indian passport after escaping from prison in Turkey. In Sofia, he had contacts with members of a powerful crime syndicate, the "Turkish mafia," that had been involved in smuggling arms and other contraband into Turkey with the tacit approval of Bulgaria's Communist authorities.

Bulgaria has failed to provide a convincing explanation for how it was possible for one of Turkey's most wanted murderers to stay in the best hotels in Sofia for at least six weeks without attracting attention.

According to Mario Martella, the Italian magistrate who handled the preliminary investigations, the Bulgarian authorities falsified documents relating to Agca's stay in Sofia. Martella argued that the changes were designed to make it appear as though Agca must have been lying about the dates of alleged meetings with Bulgarian officials and a leading member of the Turkish mafia, Bekir Celenk, one of the defendants.

The nature of the chain of relationships between Agca, a right-wing Turkish terrorist group known as the Gray Wolves, the Turkish mafia and the Bulgarian authorities remains mysterious. Proponents of a "Bulgarian connection" to the papal plot have argued that the Communist authorities used the mafia to hire Agca to shoot the pope. A rival theory holds that the Gray Wolves exploited their contacts with the mafia to hide Agca in Sofia after his escape from a Turkish prison.

■ The Italian investigation. The trial demonstrated glaring holes in the pretrial investigation into the papal assassination attempt. Martella concentrated on checking out Agca's "confessions" in prison and his allegations against the Bulgarians, while largely overlooking proven links between Agca and right-wing Turks. A new investigation has been opened by the Italian authorities to plug the gaps in the initial, two-year inquiry.

Although little evidence has emerged to support the defense contention that Agca was persuaded to implicate the Bulgarians by the Italian secret services, the way in which the pope's would-be assassin gave his testimony raises disturbing questions. A study of Martella's 1,200-page indictment shows that the Turk could have learned some of the incriminating details about the Bulgarian defendants in the course of the investigation.

Procedural lapses in the investigation included the fact that Agca was allowed access to a Rome telephone directory that contained numbers he later gave to Martella to support his contention that he had a personal relationship with the Bulgarians.

Continued

Rome Court Acquits 6 in Papal Plot

Jury Finds Insufficient Evidence of 'Bulgarian Connection'

By Michael Dobbs
Washington Post Foreign Service

ROME, March 29—An Italian court acquitted three Bulgarians and three Turks today of charges of plotting with Turkish gunman Mehmet Ali Agca to assassinate Pope John Paul II in May 1981.

Announcing the verdicts reached by a jury made up of two judges and six lay jurors at the end of a 10-month trial, presiding Judge Severino Santiapichi said that there was not enough evidence to convict the defendants of the conspiracy charges. Under the Italian legal system, this formula is considered a compromise verdict, a step short of a full acquittal on the grounds of proven innocence.

Today's verdicts effectively meant that, despite an extremely complex judicial investigation lasting almost five years, Italian magistrates are still baffled about the circumstances surrounding Agca's attack on the pope. They have been unable to prove allegations, made by the prosecutor who handled the pretrial investigation, of a Soviet Bloc connection to the assassination attempt or to identify any of Agca's accomplices beyond reasonable doubt.

Agca, 28, who shot and seriously wounded the pope in St. Peter's Square, had depicted the defendants as his accomplices in the assassination attempt. In pretrial testimony, he said that Turkish intermediaries had paid him the equivalent of \$1.2 million to murder the Polish-born pontiff on behalf of the Bulgarian secret service.

Lawyers for Sergei Antonov, the one Bulgarian in Italian custody, said they would appeal today's verdict in the hope of eventually winning a full acquittal for their client.

Antonov, 37, the former deputy manager in Rome for the Bulgarian state airline Balkanair, has been held in prison or house arrest in Italy since Nov. 25, 1982. "I

am happy that Antonov will be able finally to go free after three years of unjustified imprisonment. But I don't like this sort of compromise verdict, which is unique to Italy," said Giuseppe Consolo, the Italian defense lawyer for the Bulgarian defendants.

[Bulgaria's state-run news agency BTA said the verdict showed that the so-called Bulgarian connection "existed solely in the writings of professional anticommunists . . . political provocateurs and experts in subversion and psychological warfare." The Associated Press reported from Vienna.

[The Soviet news agency Tass said: "The West's reactionary quarters failed to take advantage of the case of the attempted pope murder to further their sordid aims of

smearing the Bulgarian nationals and thereby besmirching socialist countries," United Press International reported from Moscow.]

Italian magistrates blocked Bulgarian plans to fly Antonov back to Sofia this afternoon on a regular Balkanair flight on the grounds that the necessary paperwork had not been completed.

Prosecutor Antonio Marini said that he had no plans to appeal the court's verdicts on the Bulgarian defendants, since they were in line with his final recommendations to the jury last month. He said, however, that he probably would appeal the acquittals of the Turkish defendants, since he had earlier called for convictions.

Marini linked the acquittals to the bizarre behavior of Agca, who reversed himself repeatedly during the trial and made grandiose claims—including that he was Jesus Christ—that undercut the credibility of his testimony. Marini said he would have supported psychiatric tests of his star witness to determine whether Agca is insane or has simply been pretending to be crazy to disrupt the trial.

It was largely on the basis of Agca's statements during a two-year pretrial investigation that the state brought charges of conspiracy to murder against the Bulgarian and Turkish defendants.

The other Bulgarian defendants acquitted today were Todor Aivazov, 42, and Lt. Col. Zhelio Vasilev, 43, the cashier and assistant military attache at the Bulgarian Embassy in Rome at the time of the assassination attempt. Both men returned to Bulgaria before they could be arrested and refused to attend the present trial on the grounds of diplomatic immunity.

Also acquitted was Musa Serdar Celebi, 34, the head of a right-wing Turkish emigre organization in West Germany accused by Agca of providing logistical support for the assassination attempt. The court withdrew a warrant for the arrest of another right-wing Turk, Oral Celik, 26.

Omer Bagci, 40, a junior member of Celebi's organization, was found guilty of smuggling the gun used by Agca to shoot the pope into Italy and was sentenced to three years' imprisonment. But the court cleared him of the principal charge of conspiracy on the grounds that there was no proof he had any knowledge of Agca's intentions. Judicial sources said Bagci will not have to serve the term because he already has been jailed for a longer period since being extradited from Switzerland on Oct. 15, 1982.

A fourth Turkish defendant, Bekir Celenk, died on Oct. 14, 1985, of a heart attack in a Turkish prison.

Agca, who already is serving a life sentence for the attempted murder of the pope, was sentenced to a further one-year prison term on the charge of smuggling a gun into Italy.



Agca makes a statement after court announces verdict.